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SMALL BUSINESS | SMALL BUSINESS

How Wayne State Police Helped Breathe Life Into a Blighted Detroit Strip

By STACY COWLEY FEB. 25, 2015

DETROIT — When Christopher Prater and his wife, TaNisha — Detroit natives who returned home after 12 years in Atlanta — went scouting for a location for the clothing boutique they planned to open, he was horrified by the address of a spot she suggested. It was on Cass Avenue, a once-blighted strip with a sordid history of drugs and prostitution.

“I told her very adamantly and vehemently that there is no way in the world I’m taking my sons to Cass,” he said. “To my mind, that was no place to be at 12 noon, much less 12 midnight.”

The neighborhood Mr. Prater found, when he was finally lured out to look, bore few traces of the one he remembered.

Now called Midtown, the area is one of Detroit’s most striking economic-revival success stories and a veritable haven for small businesses, which had been among the biggest casualties of the city’s urban decay. Coffee shops, yoga studios, restaurants and clothing boutiques now fill spaces that sat empty for decades. The district’s retail vacancy rate has fallen to 10 percent, down from 22 percent six years ago, and its residential occupancy rate tops 97 percent.

Nearly every business is locally owned, though a few national chains are creeping in. Whole Foods arrived two years ago, and Carhartt, the Michigan retailer known for its rugged work clothes, is preparing to open its first Detroit store.

Years of dogged, incremental work went into the district’s renaissance, much of it led by the nonprofit development group Midtown Detroit Inc. But those who live and work in the area also point to a more unusual catalyst: the Wayne State

University police department, which has become the primary security force in Midtown.

This is no ordinary campus police squad. The department, which spends most of its time operating beyond the university, has invested in high-tech security equipment that looks as if it came straight from the set of “C.S.I.” Since most small businesses operate on razor-thin margins and cannot afford the financial toll of even petty crime, the force has been one of the area’s biggest assets, residents and owners say.

“We couldn’t operate here without them,” said Christina Lovio-George, who has run a public relations firm in the neighborhood for 33 years.

All of Wayne State’s officers are commissioned by the Detroit Police Department, with the same enforcement powers as the city’s force. The department’s hiring standards, though, are stricter: Wayne State requires its officers to have a bachelor’s degree, while city officers need only a high school diploma. The two departments collaborate closely, and of the 1,362 arrests made in Midtown last year, 61 percent were made by Wayne State’s officers.

For years, calling 911 in Detroit has been a gamble. The average response time to the highest-priority calls stretched sometimes to nearly an hour. Wayne State’s department promises a 90-second response to calls within its territory.

Nefertiti Harris, the owner of Textures, a beauty salon, recalled the afternoon she spotted a man rifling through cars parked outside her store. “I bolted out of the salon, and he ran down the street,” she said. “Then I called Wayne State. They were there within two minutes. Five minutes later, they had him.”

Many of the area’s retailers have similar stories. Rachel Lutz considered several city locations for her first boutique, the Peacock Room, which opened in 2011. Midtown’s security was the deciding factor. A single woman, she says she wanted to be in an area where she would feel safe leaving her shop alone at night. She also wanted somewhere she could display her wares in a sidewalk-facing window without inviting vandalism.

“If you go into a gas station with a bulletproof window, it sends a message,” she said. “That’s not what I wanted for my store.”

Wayne State’s officers had helped out residents and businesses surrounding the school for decades, but in 2009, the university did something unorthodox: It expanded the department’s purview to cover all crime calls in a four-square-mile

territory that encompasses both the campus and all of Midtown. At most schools, security officers only operate off-campus when crimes involve or affect students or faculty members.

The goal, university officials say, was to draw new residents to the area and assuage students' No. 1 concern about living there.

"People won't move somewhere they don't feel safe," said Michael G. Wright, Wayne State's chief of staff. "We recognized that if Detroit was going to experience an economic comeback — particularly in Midtown, our neighborhood — this was a big issue."

With a larger budget from the university and grants from several foundations, Wayne State's police chief, Anthony D. Holt, a 38-year veteran of the force who became its leader in 2008, expanded his department and shifted some of its practices.

The unit adopted a data-driven CompStat program to help it identify and disrupt crime patterns in "hot spot" areas. It also began focusing on preventive tactics. One of its most successful programs entails sending its officers out along with the Michigan Department of Corrections' parole agents when they do home checks in the area. "When the person opens the door, they see two police officers," Chief Holt said. "The agent goes in, and if any contraband is found, the person goes with us."

To stretch his department's staff of 60 officers — nearly twice the number it had six years ago — Chief Holt became a technology evangelist. Wayne State's video surveillance system is among the most extensive in Michigan, with 850 cameras tracking locations across the school's campus and beyond.

From the monitoring room at the department's headquarters, Chief Holt shows off the system's precision: an officer zeros in on the license plate of a car traveling to Canada across the Ambassador Bridge, four miles away. When a crime call comes in, Wayne State's officers can often get eyes on the scene in seconds.

The efforts are paying off. Midtown's major-crimes rate is down 52 percent since 2008, and its empty buildings and storefronts are disappearing. Four hundred new residential units are under construction, with 1,700 more in the development pipeline.

"It takes a very long time to rebuild the fabric of a place," said Susan Mosey, the president of Midtown Detroit Inc. "Density is the driver. As we have more people

living here, the business folks are naturally attracted to these areas, and the momentum builds.”

Thirty-seven new Midtown businesses opened last year. One of them is Thrift on the Avenue, the Praters’ clothing store. Mr. Prater says his views have completely flipped. He is comfortable in the neighborhood at all hours, and says he is especially impressed by the way Wayne State’s officers interact with those who live and work in the area. On a recent walk, he and his brother ran into several officers and stopped to chat about how things were going at the store.

“We’re African-American. Historically, our interaction with the police has been pretty different,” he said. “Here, they’re part of the community. They’re involved. We know each other by name. It makes the relationship a lot better, so you don’t have the problem of feeling like they antagonize you.”

Chief Holt — who is quick to hand out his cellphone number to local business owners and encourage them to use it — draws praise from many in the area for cultivating his department’s community ties. Back in her firm’s early days, Ms. Lovio-George recalls, the officers patrolling the neighborhood would come by early in the morning to help her employees clear the junk, like syringes and abandoned couches, that often accumulated overnight. They would also swing by at 9 p.m., as she was leaving, to make sure she got out safely.

Ms. Harris, who has run her salon out of Midtown for 14 years, says the clearest sign of the area’s renaissance is the neighboring businesses she now sees around her in buildings that were long vacant. She is particularly excited to have Detroit expats like the Praters moving back.

“They’re bringing in all kinds of new businesses, creativity and energy,” she said. “You see more children in the area, and people walking their pets. People feel secure here. It’s how it should be over the whole city.”

A version of this article appears in print on February 26, 2015, on page B5 of the New York edition with the headline: Campus Police Keeping Detroit Shops Safe.

TONY WITTKOWSKI

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by tonyjwittkowski

SAGINAW COUNTY SHERIFF DEPUTIZES 20 CMU POLICE OFFICERS FOR CMED SAGINAW CAMPUS

By Tony Wittkowski | *Senior Reporter* |
Central Michigan Life

Twenty Central Michigan University police officers were deputized in Saginaw County last week in preparation for the opening of the College of Medicine's Saginaw campus.

The idea stemmed from a conversation between Saginaw County Sheriff William Federspiel and CMU Police Chief Bill Yeagley about student safety in Saginaw as local police forces dwindle.

"I could not guarantee that the city police department would be able to patrol on a regular interval at the medical school, so, in an alternate form of collaboration, I decided

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to ask (Yeagley) what he thought about me deputizing some of his officers," Federspiel said.

Federspiel said when officers come to Saginaw County, they will have full powers of arrests while in uniform.

This marks the first time Federspiel has ever deputized or given officers jurisdiction outside of Saginaw County. It had been seen as a liability because the sheriff is responsible for any officer deputized. However, Federspiel said it was more beneficial to the public in Saginaw.

"It's a benefit to the university, to the students who are going to be future doctors, and it's a benefit to our citizens on this collaborative effort," Federspiel said.

On Jan. 17, Federspiel traveled to Mount Pleasant and deputized almost all of the CMU officers with an oath and notoriety. Two more officers who were unable to attend the initial ceremony will travel to Saginaw to be deputized.

Yeagley said this does not mean CMU officers will be rushing out to Saginaw as first responders.

"It's their community; it's their jurisdiction. They are the closest, and they understand how their community works," Yeagley said.

Originally, CMU police only had authority on university property, but Yeagley said they are not the only police force deputized in more than one area.

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The Mount Pleasant Police Department has authority and jurisdiction within all city limits but were also deputized by Isabella County Sheriff Leo Mioduszeewski. They are additionally deputized through the tribal police for tribal lands.

The only other time the law would recognize CMU police outside of their jurisdiction, Yeagley said, would occur if another agency asked for their help specifically.

"By law, you have the same police powers, as long as you are assisting them," Yeagley said.

CMU police has been deputized for many years now, Mioduszeewski said.

"They can go outside university property and conduct interviews, make an arrest if they have to, or, if they see a drunk driver out of their typical jurisdiction, they can take action and pull that individual over based on their authority through the sheriff," Mioduszeewski said.

The deputization lasts for four years or when a new sheriff is elected for the county.


The main reason police agencies are deputized is so investigations are smoother, Mioduszeewski said. Without this small measure, the visiting agency could not make an arrest without the proper authorities.

"We've got a very cooperative relationship with all the police agencies here, and it benefits the county, too, because if they witness a crime, then they can take action without having to wait for a deputy to get there," Mioduszeewski said.

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